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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001683

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)  
SUBJECT: PARTY LEADERSHIP HANGS IN BALANCE OF BY-ELECTION  
RESULTS

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: October 28 by-elections to fill five National Assembly seats will be a referendum on the ruling right-of-center Grand National Party (GNP) and the main opposition left-of-center Democratic Party (DP), and are also likely to determine the fate of party leaders Chung Mong-joon (GNP) and Chung Sye-kyun (DP). The outcome will not affect the inter-party balance of power in the National Assembly. Two of the contested seats are in the cities of Suwon and Ansan in Gyeonggi Province (near Seoul). One is outside Busan, in Yangsan. The other two are in Gangneung, in Gangwon Province, and Jeungpyeong, in North Chungcheong Province. Suwon is the most important race and will likely cost the losing party's chairman his job. Yangsan, which ought to be a slam-dunk for the GNP, is proving closer than expected, and a loss there could also doom the GNP chairman. End Summary.

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Suwon, Gyeonggi Province  
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¶2. (C) Suwon, the capital of Gyeonggi Province which surrounds Seoul, is the site of the fiercest battle between the GNP and DP. Park Chan-sook (GNP) has an edge (31.5 percent) over DP candidate Lee Chan-yeol (26.9), who is backed by the former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn Hak-kyu. (NOTE: Unless otherwise noted, all polls cited are from the JoongAng Newspaper from October 14-17. END NOTE.) The DP tried to recruit Sohn, who has been in virtual seclusion since failing in his bid for the presidency, to run in Suwon. But he declined, insiders say, to avoid making his election a victory for DP leader Chung Sye-kyun, whom Sohn would like to replace as DP chairman. Nevertheless, Sohn is campaigning hard for DP candidate Lee, and Sohn's future as a power broker within the party may rest on whether he can deliver this seat. Sohn's job would be easier if the minor leftist Democratic Labor Party (DLP) candidate -- who is currently polling at 5.9 percent -- would back the DP candidate. GNP insiders expect the GNP to pull off a narrow win of what should be a GNP seat.

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Ansan, Gyeonggi Province  
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¶3. (C) The outcome in Ansan will depend on the ability of the liberal candidates to unite, which so far they have failed to do. DP candidate Kim Young-hwan is currently in the lead (24.9 percent) followed by GNP candidate Song Jin-seop (20.5) and leftist independent candidate Im Jong-in (12.1). Kim and Im were expected to announce a deal to merge their campaigns on October 22, but negotiations fell through. It is a seat the DP should win.

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Yangsan, South Gyeongsang Province  
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14. (C) GNP elder statesman, former five-term lawmaker, and former party chairman Park Hee-tae stepped down from his position as party chief in order to run for the Yangsan seat. He currently leads his competitors (29.8 percent), but Blue House officials told us they are concerned that Park might not be able to pull it off. Park has no connection to Yangsan other than that it is an open seat in a GNP stronghold that should easily allow him to fulfill his dream of returning to the National Assembly after failing to gain a nomination for the April 2008 election. Independent conservative candidate Kim Yang-soo (11.2 percent), on the other hand, represented Yangsan in the 2004-2008 National Assembly. The split in the conservative vote, combined with the efforts of supporters of former President Roh Moo-hyun in nearby Bonghwa Village (Roh's hometown) to campaign for DP candidate Song In-bae (14.9 percent) make the vote closer than many would have expected. A more recent local newspaper poll had Kim (Ind: 25 percent) and Song (DP: 21 percent) quickly narrowing the gap. Kim's independent victory would be an embarrassment for the GNP while a DP win would be a disaster.

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Jeungpyeong, North Chungcheong Province  
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15. (C) In what is currently the closest race, DP candidate Chung Beom-gu (20.7 percent) is in a statistical dead-heat

with GNP candidate Kyung Dae-su (20.0). In this race too, conservative independent candidate Kim Kyung-hoi (16.1) threatens to facilitate a DP win if he continues to refuse to back Kyung (GNP). Kim, who tried and failed to get the GNP nomination, is unlikely to withdraw. The Chungcheong-based Liberty Forward Party (LFP) candidate, Chung Won-hun, is trailing far behind at a meager 1.6 percent. Notably, Chung was nominated by Lee Yong-hee, another North Chungcheong politician, not by LFP party leader Lee Hoi-chang. This race is a toss-up, but insiders say the constituency leans toward the DP.

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Gangneung, Gangwon Province  
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16. (U) In the only certain victory for the GNP, Kwon Sun-dong (32 percent) is far ahead of his rivals, independent candidates Song Young-chul (15.9 percent) and Shim Gi-seop (13.8 percent).

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Party Consequences  
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17. (C) With the exception of Gangneung, all the races are too close to call. DP Chief Policymaker Park Jie-won told us on October 15 that the DP had "given up" on the races in Gangneung and in Yangsan, though the margins in the latter have narrowed considerably. The party previously occupied the North Chungcheong seat, so two or more wins would give them a net gain in the National Assembly. Park Jie-won predicted that the DP could only hope to win two seats -- North Chungcheong and Ansan. With these two, Park believed DP chief Chung Sye-kyun could keep his position. If the DP wins only one seat or, as many analysts believe, loses Suwon, there will likely be a party convention early next year to pick a new leader.

18. (C) GNP leader and presidential hopeful Chung Mong-joon is facing a similar test. A loss in Yangsan would be particularly damaging, but many say the GNP needs to win at least three seats, including Suwon, for Chung to retain his newly-acquired post -- anything less would be a net loss for

the GNP, as the party occupied three of the five seats now up for re-election.

19. (C) The party chairmen will play influential roles in their respective parties' nominations and campaign strategies for the important June 2010 regional elections, which will decide new governors, mayors, and local councils across the country. The outcomes of the June 2010 elections will set the stage for the intra-party contests leading up to the 2012 presidential elections. So, for the parties, the significance of the October 2009 by-elections is much greater than the five seats in play, but has implications extending all the way to the election of the next President of the Republic of Korea.  
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